



# Key Lessons

From California Schools Working to  
Change School Food Environments



**Healthy Eating Active Communities**  
*a program of The California Endowment*

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# Key Lessons

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The California Endowment (The Endowment) is committed to halting the rise in childhood obesity rates by investing in improving food environments so that children and families can make healthy food choices. The Endowment's approach requires working closely with the communities where children live and helping parents and community members understand that healthy eating is a choice that takes considerable thought, planning and effort. One area ripe for change is the school system, which has become a largely unhealthy food environment.

### Why Focus on Schools?

Healthy eating habits ideally are established during childhood, and schools are uniquely positioned to model, promote and reinforce healthy behaviors. Schools are logical places to spread messages about nutrition and create environments that promote health and prevent chronic conditions such as diabetes and obesity.

Work to improve school food environments will reach most children, their caregivers and school staff.

In addition, schools are a public environment; state education codes and federal guidelines govern what foods can be sold on school grounds. Some policymakers have recognized that schools can facilitate healthy lifestyles and have used their governing power in the effort to prevent childhood obesity. Because schools play a central role in communities, they can serve as models for how other community institutions can put policies in place to assure healthy food environments for their employees, clients and visitors.

### The California Experience

California schools have taken the lead in improving school environments to make them healthier for children. California was the first state in the nation to set nutrition standards

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for competitive foods—those not part of the official school lunch—sold on school campuses. In addition, federal legislation that reauthorized the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program required that all participating school districts establish a local school wellness policy in the 2006-2007 academic year (Public Law 208-265). At a minimum, these district-level policies must address nutrition and physical activity, offer guidelines for foods sold on school campuses and provide a plan for implementing and enforcing the wellness policy. This recently enacted requirement precipitated a flurry of activity at the local level and has made improving student nutrition and physical activity a higher priority for many school districts.

Changing the food environment in California schools has been a challenge and has taken longer than some advocates would have liked. However, it has also been rewarding to see that schools are able to substantially improve the healthfulness of the foods they sell to children. This brief shares the collective learning from The Endowment's experience supporting work to improve school food, especially early lessons from The Endowment's Healthy Eating, Active

Communities (HEAC) program. The brief provides communities and school districts with the opportunity to learn from the experience gained in California. The idea for the brief emerged from a conversation held at a meeting of statewide leaders convened in 2006 by The Endowment. Key issues, achievements, challenges and solutions are presented based on the experience of California public health, nutrition and research professionals working to make healthy eating part of the daily lives of children while they are in school.

### **Building Partnerships: Knowing Who to Work With in the District and How Best to Collaborate With Them**

#### **The Challenge**

Many school staff members working to improve the school food environment experience a steep learning curve. They often need to enhance leadership skills and nutrition expertise, and find guidance to help them identify available resources, technical assistance and training on strategies to improve the school food environment. They also need to engage members of the school community when changing food environments.



## Solutions

### Leadership Skills

District staff directing efforts to improve school food environments will maximize their success by acquiring the leadership skills that allow them to:

- Identify, engage and communicate with many individuals who may have competing priorities;
- Play the role of facilitator as well as catalyst for change;
- Foster collaboration; and
- Connect with state and community organizations that do nutrition-related work and can provide schools with resources, training and technical assistance, such as public health departments, universities, YMCAs and recreation departments, California Project LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition), local chapters of the American Heart Association or American Cancer Society, Action for Healthy Kids, and healthy food vendors.

### Engaging the School Community

Within each school district, there are a number of key constituencies whose support may accelerate and ensure the success of efforts to change the school food environment.

California districts working to change their food environments learned that a number of primary audiences—students, parents, food service personnel and school board members—must be engaged.

- **Students:** Involving students in the policy development process facilitates student acceptance of the policy, minimizes student opposition and improves policy implementation. The experience of participating in the policy development process often transforms students into advocates for improving the school nutrition environment, which then encourages policy support from other students, parents, administrators and school board members.
- **Parents:** Parents are an important force for change in school districts, and a mobilized parent group can have great influence on district or school administrators. Engaging parents in the policy development, adoption, implementation and evaluation processes will:
  - Enhance visibility of the policy through parent-to-parent word of mouth;
  - Build parent support for the policy;
  - Minimize parent opposition to the policy; and



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- Potentially bring influential parent groups (such as the PTA or Booster Clubs) on board as policy supporters and implementers since these groups often sell foods and beverages as fundraisers.
- **Food Service Personnel:** The district food services department is central to any policy addressing school foods, from development of the policy through adoption, implementation and enforcement. Food service directors should play a key role in any effort to change the school food environment given their knowledge of federal and state school nutrition laws, and of food vendors and vendor contracts.
- **School Board Members:** School board members are the ultimate decision-making body within a district, but they are usually extremely busy considering a wide range of issues. Nutrition may not be their highest priority. Framing messages to emphasize the benefits of the proposed policy and appeal to board concerns may be helpful for attracting school board attention and support. Specific issues to address include:
  - The link between nutrition and academic achievement;

- The link between nutrition and improved attendance;
- The practical benefits to the students (feeling better and chronic disease prevention); and
- Financial considerations of implementing the policy.

### Positioning Within the District: Who Has the Power to Change the School Environment?

#### The Challenge

Each policy effort needs at least one champion, and in the case of improving school food environments, the position that person holds within the school district's administrative structure greatly influences the policy process. However, part of the challenge is identifying and enlisting an effective champion. School staff may need the help of external individuals to find the right champion.

#### Solutions

Be sure that efforts to improve school food environments include senior-level staff who have the needed authority and decision-making ability within the school district's administrative structure. Recruit a school board member or



high-level district administrator to be part of the team. Find a high-level champion by asking members of the school community to identify who among the district leaders would be effective champions for changing the school food environment. The champions must be able to convincingly articulate what the policy is trying to accomplish, why it is important and how students will benefit. Districts have found that board members or administrators with a personal interest in nutrition or health make excellent champions for environmental change.

If a school district is unable to recruit a high-level district administrator to push for improving the school food environment, pressure from groups outside of the school district may help. Community members, health professionals and community-based organizations outside the school district, such as local chapters of the American Cancer Society, can pressure district leaders and decision makers to support changing the school food environment. National media coverage, state legislation and community advocacy have all played roles in pressuring school districts to adopt better policies.

## **Going Outside the District: Collaborating with Non-Education Organizations**

### **The Challenge**

Advocates, public health departments or other non-education organizations may have little understanding of the inner workings of schools. They may be unaware of the limitations of the school calendar and may not know which months are best for activities and interventions. Community organizations may also have little knowledge of district specific issues such as the role of unions (teachers' union, food service workers' union, etc.).

### **Solutions**

Schools can greatly benefit from the expertise and resources that community partners (such as public health departments, community-based organizations and local civic leaders) can bring to efforts to improve school food environments. Representatives from local health departments or community groups can serve as champions, advocates and constituents demanding change from the school board.

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Partners external to the school district should keep the following points in mind in their efforts to support implementation of school nutrition policies:

- Collaborating and effectively engaging external partners is a new experience for many school districts. School staff often has limited time for these activities during the school day.
- Building relationships and capacities takes time.
- Effective interaction with schools requires knowledge of how schools work, particularly the protocols for approaching contacts within the school bureaucracy.
- The culture of the school system is important, and should guide decisions about when and how to advocate for change.
  - School-based activities must accommodate the school calendar. There are only about six functional months once the start and end of the school year, holidays and testing days are taken into account. Partners working with schools must schedule research and interventions at appropriate times during the school year.

- Partners outside the education system must be prepared to explain and reiterate the importance of changing the school environment for healthy eating and gradually educate schools to think about health beyond individual behaviors.
- Schools may need help understanding the link between health and academic success.

## Navigating the Political Climate: Working Through the Opposition

### The Challenge

Members of the school community hold beliefs and perspectives that help form the political climate surrounding efforts to change school policies and practices. Students and parents may be concerned that limiting the selection of foods and beverages at school places a limit on students' "freedom of choice." Some parents and school staff feel that parents and guardians, rather than the school, should teach kids about healthy eating. Teachers, staff and administrators may fear that new policies will increase their workload and/or complicate established classroom or cafeteria routines.



Financial concerns play a central role in the decision to modify school food policies. Many schools rely on the profits from foods sold outside the school meal program to fund student activities, particularly athletics. Opposition to changing the foods allowed for sale stems from fears that change will lead to decreased sales, resulting in decreased revenues for the school's clubs, teams and food services.

Finally, the Federal *No Child Left Behind* policy has drastically changed the way schools operate by holding schools accountable for student academic proficiency. This has forced schools to focus their attention almost exclusively on academics and shy away from addressing other important topics such as student wellness and nutrition.

### Solutions

Champions need to be prepared to provide evidence to a broad spectrum of school constituents in order to gain their support for policy development and implementation and to foster a sense that they have a vested interest in making their program successful. Districts that have made progress in implementing policies to address school food have found the following approaches useful.

- **Present Evidence:** Gather data and present results of research to key individuals. School district personnel found that presenting compelling data on the health consequences of consuming sweetened beverages and unhealthy foods, the weight and fitness status of a district's students, and the rates of childhood obesity and diabetes was instrumental in gaining support for a district policy change. Data specific to a district's student population, such as weight and height or dietary intake studies, proved especially compelling to opinion leaders in the school community.
- **Challenge Arguments About Freedom of Choice:** Describe how the limited availability of healthy items limits students' freedom to choose healthy foods. School food environments are created by choices (made by the food service department, school staff, volunteers, vendors and district administrators) that are outside the students' and parents' control. Providing students with the opportunity to choose healthy foods can actually increase their freedom of choice and their control over the healthfulness of their diet.



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- **Counter Arguments About School Responsibility for Creating Healthy Food Environments:** Point out that students may eat up to two meals and one snack at school, that poor diet has been linked to reduced academic achievement, and that schools have a duty to create a school environment that promotes health and learning. Research has shown that healthier students have better school attendance and attain higher levels of academic achievement.

- **Address the School Community's Fiscal Concerns:** Share stories of other districts that have made school food policies financially viable. The success of a school nutrition policy often depends on the degree to which it is financially feasible to implement. California districts have employed the following strategies to minimize the fiscal impact of implementing food policies:

- Pilot implementation of the policy at one school in the district to demonstrate the financial feasibility of proposed changes;
- Present data and business plans from other districts that have implemented similar policies;

- Provide financial support to food services and student activities during the initial policy implementation to maintain consistent funding during the transition period;
- Minimize or eliminate foods sold outside the school meal programs while enhancing participation in the breakfast and lunch programs to increase federal funds for food services;
- Place all food and beverage sales under the control of the district's food service department and profit share with school groups selling food for fundraising;
- Analyze food and beverage sales data to track financial impact of implementing the policy; and
- Implement new methods of fundraising that do not involve the sale of unhealthy foods and beverages.

## Sustaining Policy Change: Monitoring Policy Implementation

### The Challenge

After a policy to change the school food environment is developed, adopted and



implemented, it is tempting to think that the work is done. But because of the many demands on the time and attention of schools, implemented policies may be allowed to drift over time. The challenge is to sustain the environmental changes dictated by the policy over the long haul.

### Solutions

Districts experienced at changing their environment have identified a number of strategies for maintaining change over the long term:

- Task a particular office with the responsibility for maintaining, monitoring and enforcing the policy and for setting a timeline with implementation and monitoring schedules;
- Secure the support and continued involvement of the food service department, the entity often most responsible for monitoring and enforcing food-related policies;
- Include a number of activities in an implementation plan, such as cafeteria improvements, outreach activities, or school food report cards;
- Form a committee to address challenges to policy implementation and reactions of students and faculty;

- Facilitate ongoing communication with parents, students and school staff by developing a communication and education plan that informs the school community of why the policy was put in place and reinforces the benefits of healthy eating;
- Engage students, parents and other key individuals within the district in all stages of the policy process to successfully improve the school food environment; and
- Maintain continuous engagement of the school board through progress reports and presentations on policy implementation and impacts.

### Conclusion

A movement is growing to change school environments to support healthy eating. School districts, states and the federal government have started developing policy strategies to ensure that school campuses support student health. As schools recognize the link between healthy eating and academic achievement, they have begun to examine their environments. Although improving the school food environment will require substantial change, commitment and effort, schools will be supported by the growing library of tools,

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experts, best practices and lessons learned from the early adopters of these policies. In order to fund and sustain improvements to the school food environment, schools must cultivate and mobilize a broad constituency of supporters to advocate for policies that support healthy school foods.

## References

*Playing the Policy Game: Preparing Teen Leaders to Take Action on Healthy Eating and Physical Activity* includes a section on conducting a campus survey that simplifies the assessment and data collection stage for youth. It also outlines activities that drive the policy change process and includes materials for developing an action plan. [www.CaliforniaProjectLEAN.org](http://www.CaliforniaProjectLEAN.org)

*Policy in Action: A Guide to Implementing Your Local School Wellness Policy* includes an easy-to-use handout to help prioritize key elements of your policy, information on developing an implementation plan and an inside look at selecting strategies for implementing key elements of your policy based on experiences of others who have implemented similar policies. [www.CaliforniaProjectLEAN.org](http://www.CaliforniaProjectLEAN.org)

*Competitive Foods Policy Brief* describes the competitive food landscape in 40 California public schools. [www.samuelsandassociates.com](http://www.samuelsandassociates.com)

*Selling Obesity: Beverage Vending Machines in California High Schools* describes the types of beverages available to high school students and their accessibility and visibility on campus. [www.samuelsandassociates.com](http://www.samuelsandassociates.com)

*Improving School Food Environments through District-Level Policies: Findings from Six California Case Studies.* [www.samuelsandassociates.com](http://www.samuelsandassociates.com)

*Linking Education, Activity, and Food: Pilot Intervention of SB19 in California Middle and High Schools Report on Accomplishments, Impacts and Lessons Learned* discusses key strategies that school districts made to implement nutrition standards. [http://nature.berkeley.edu/cwh/PDFs/LEAF\\_Accomplishments\\_Report.pdf](http://nature.berkeley.edu/cwh/PDFs/LEAF_Accomplishments_Report.pdf)

*Taking Action for Healthy School Environments: Linking Education, Activity, and Food in California Secondary Schools* tells the story of how educational and community leadership in 18 school districts developed new approaches, in both policies and programs, to creating healthy learning environments. [www.californiahealthykids.org/articles/linking\\_secondary.pdf](http://www.californiahealthykids.org/articles/linking_secondary.pdf)

*Student Wellness: A Healthy Food and Physical Activity Policy Resource Guide* includes information on local wellness and physical activity resources, sample policies, case studies and fact sheets. [www.CaliforniaProjectLEAN.org](http://www.CaliforniaProjectLEAN.org)

*Reaching School Board Members: A Guide for Creating a Clear, Concise and Compelling Nutrition Policy Campaign* helps community groups create “win-win” situations with school board members based on research with the policymakers. [www.CaliforniaProjectLEAN.org](http://www.CaliforniaProjectLEAN.org)



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